



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Redeeming Women in the Grand Narrative of Scripture  
(*Women in the Bible*, pp. 11-22)

### Suggested Articles:

📖 Rebekah's Scheme  
(*Women in the Bible*, pp. 54-55)

📖 Judith's Co-conspirator  
(*Women in the Bible*, pp. 56-58)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# Redeeming Women in the Grand Narrative of Scripture

In light of the biblical grand narrative of redemption and restorative justice, patriarchy and androcentrism can no longer be seen as normative, but as regrettable conditions that God and God's human agents are working to overcome. Understanding Scripture's so-called 'difficult passages' in the light of the grand narrative begins to dissolve and relativize the problems in these texts.

### Responsive Prayer

God of creation, we know that we are made in your image, male and female. Yet, too often we have failed to honor the dignity of one another.

**We have confined ourselves by holding one another to small roles and identities, based on gender. We have disrespected one other; we have labeled and treated one another as stereotypes.**

We have not honored the mystery of those who are different from us. We have closed our minds and our hearts to one another.

**Forgive us and help us, Lord, we pray. Amen.**

Scripture Readings: Genesis 1:26-27 and 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

### Reflection

For some readers today the Bible has lost its authority, Junia Pokrifka admits, because it seems to them to be "written by men, about men, and for men." Women are only at the periphery of many of its stories, and sometimes are denigrated.

But these readers are missing something that is important – what feminist theologian Letty Russell once called the Bible's overarching "story of God's love affair with the world." They fail to see this proverbial forest of love as they study some of its trees in isolation. And that is why Pokrifka urges us to read the Bible the other way around, interpreting its parts in terms of the whole story. She believes "a grand narrative approach can help us to understand the Bible as authoritative and redemptive for both women and men."

The biblical narrative has *three stages* – a beginning (Genesis 1-11), middle (the rest of the Old Testament), and end or perhaps the beginning of the end (the New Testament). Each stage, Pokrifka continues, "is marked by *three parallel themes*: creation or inaugurated new creation (or partial redemption), rebellion and its consequences, and the promise or hope of complete new creation (full redemption). In turn, each theme includes *three elements* – the image of God, procreation or fruitfulness, and dominion – that particularly concern the identity and destiny of women in God's purposes."

Let's see how Pokrifka employs this grand narrative to interpret a "difficult text" – the Apostle Paul's concern about women teaching without a head covering (1 Corinthians 11:2-16).

- ▶ *Paul uses creational details* to frame his instructions to both men (v. 7) and women (v. 10) teachers. Here's the 'difficulty': does verse 7b contradict Genesis 1:27 and promote male superiority, as many have insisted? Pokrifka notes that Paul appeals to "nature" rather than God's created order to affirm different hairstyles for men and



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women (vv. 14-15). Women, according to Genesis 1-2, are as much the image and glory of God as men; so, Paul's suppressing this fact must be rhetorical, a way of supporting his point that Christian men and women should embrace different, culturally acceptable hairstyles. His teaching that "woman is the glory of man" (v. 7c) is not a new revelation, but a rabbinic interpretation from Genesis 2:20-23 that points to the woman's exalted status as "the crown, or completion, of humankind."

- ▶ *Paul highlights the female teachers' authority* when he says "the woman ought to have authority over her head" (v. 10), that is, the "man" (v. 3). Pokrifka translates Paul's main biblical reason for women's authority this way: "neither was man created because of woman, but woman because of man" (v. 9). When the man was incomplete without a "helper," the woman was created with equal authority to serve and guard the Garden (Genesis 2). "In a cultural context that otherwise suppressed women's voice, Paul is appealing to the creational story to encourage the women of Corinth to reclaim their creational authority to pray and prophesy freely, not only over women, but also over men," Pokrifka suggests. Yet in order to avoid "any overestimation or misapplication of the authority of women, Paul then reinforces the interdependence, mutuality, and complementarity of men and women and their ultimate dependence on God (vv. 11-12)."

Through the Bible's grand narrative we can see that "God's intention from the beginning has been to bring both women and men into the fullness of life as those created in the image God and invested with resultant dignity and responsibility," Pokrifka concludes. "Those who are redeemed are ultimately not bound to live within the limits of any sinful social order, including patriarchy." Yet, as Paul's teaching here reminds us, our freedom "must be used in godly, loving dependence on God and interdependence with other members of Christ. Before the day of God's consummated kingdom, God calls us to exercise self-giving love that is patient with others who, like us, are in process."

### Study Questions

1. How do the three *themes* – creation/inaugurated new creation, rebellion, and promise/hope of complete new creation – shape each stage of the biblical narrative?
2. How do the three *elements* – the image of God, procreation or fruitfulness, and dominion – particularly concern the identity and destiny of women in God's purposes?
3. Why does it make "hermeneutical good sense" to let the grand narrative and women's place within it limit and guide our interpretation of so-called "problem texts" (like 1 Corinthians 11:2-16) rather than the other way around?
4. Consider how Rebekah's story (as depicted by Ghiberti) and Judith's story (as depicted by Artemisia Gentileschi) reflect key themes and elements of the biblical narrative.

Departing Hymn: "Pilgrims on this Earthly Journey" (verses 1, 3, and 4)

# Redeeming Women in the Grand Narrative of Scripture

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Readings	Scripture Readings		Scripture Readings
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Survey the grand narrative of Scripture	Explore texts in Scripture and art
Question 3	Questions 2 and 3	Questions 1 and 2	Questions 3 and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To sketch the grand narrative of Scripture, emphasizing women's place within it.
2. To employ the grand narrative to interpret so-called "problem texts" related to women.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Women in the Bible (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Pilgrims on this Earthly Journey" either use the tune WEBSTER (Bolin) on p. 67 of *Women in the Bible* or locate the familiar tune STUTTGART in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

## Begin with a Comment

A leading scholar in the Second Wave of Feminism spurred by the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s was Letty Russell (1929-2007), a theologian at Yale Divinity School. She read Scripture with the techniques of historical criticism, which tend to isolate specific passages from their contexts within the biblical canon and its literary units. Nevertheless, the larger message of Scripture – what she called "the story of God's love affair with the world" – was essential to her research. "In spite of the patriarchal nature of the biblical texts, I myself have no intention of giving up the biblical basis of my theology," she explained. "The Bible has authority in my life because it makes sense of my experience and speaks to me about the meaning and purpose of my humanity in Jesus Christ. In spite of its ancient and patriarchal worldviews, in spite of its inconsistencies and mixed messages, the story of God's love affair with the world leads me to a vision of new Creation that impels my life." (Letty M. Russell, "Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation," in Letty M. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* [Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1985], 138)

## Responsive Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer responsively. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Scripture Readings

Ask two group members to read Genesis 1:26-27 and 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

In this study Junia Pokrifka outlines a method of canonical interpretation. This permits Scripture's overarching story to guide our reading of the individual texts. She briefly employs this hermeneutical approach on two Pauline passages – 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15 – that appear to ground role-restrictions for women in God's original intentions for creation. This study guide focuses on her interpretation of the first of these "problem texts."

If your group would like to extend their study, you might explore the role of women in the grand narrative of Scripture in the first session and then employ that narrative to interpret selected biblical texts – for instance, the two Pauline passages or the stories of Rebekah and Judith as depicted in the artwork in this issue.

### *Study Questions*

1. Form three study groups and ask each group to trace one of the themes through the three stages of the biblical grand narrative. Junia Pokrifka emphasizes that these are “parallel” themes. Explore how the treatment of the theme changes a bit in each stage of the narrative.
2. The three elements are intertwined. So, in the beginning of the narrative, male and female equally are created in the divine image and receive the mandate to multiply and have dominion over the earth (Genesis 1:26-28). Similarly, the woman is created an equal “helper” to the man (2:18) to care for the Garden. Their rebellion leads to frustrated procreation and frustrated dominion over the unyielding ground (3:17-19), with the latter finding a “distorted outlet in human-to-human domination” (3:16b). Pokrifka views these frustrations not as “inalterable divine mandates or prescriptions,” but as “descriptions of a corrupted state of affairs that should and will be overcome.” This frames how she interprets the stories of barrenness and fecundity in the middle part of the biblical narrative. In the third part, the themes have a new twist: “This fruitfulness finds a new expression in spiritual rather than biological children. By making disciples, Christians become the victorious ‘seed of the woman’ in a corporate sense.” Jesus sometimes breaks patriarchal customs, and through “his resurrection and ascension, Christ sets the stage for a new order for women and men alike. This new age begins in earnest at Pentecost.”
3. Pokrifka outlines a method of using Scripture to interpret Scripture. She assumes that there is a unifying narrative running through the Christian biblical canon about God’s creation of the world and victorious, loving response to its rebellion, and she puts interpretive weight on this overarching story rather than specific passages, books, or sections of the Bible. Presumably what holds Scripture together in this way is the unifying action of God, inspiring writers, redactors, compilers of the canon, and readers through the Holy Spirit. This does not mean each of these persons knows the whole story, or has it in mind when they contribute to the writing, dissemination, and interpretation of Scripture; the articulation of the grand narrative and its application to interpret particular passages or sections of Scripture is an ongoing process of discernment.
4. Heidi Hornik summarizes the stories of Rebekah’s scheming to ensure Jacob’s birthright (Genesis 25 and 27) and Judith’s saving her town by killing Holofernes (Judith 8:1-13:9).

Rebekah’s actions help fulfill God’s promise to create the people of Israel in order to bless all nations. The struggle of the twins in her womb, their deception of one another, and her deception of her husband exemplify the consequences of rebellion against God. The story features themes of (frustrated) procreation and (distorted) dominion.

On the one hand, Judith might be seen as an agent of divine protection because her clever and heroic actions help preserve the life of God’s people. However, her disturbing violence is framed by the (distorted) dominion expressed in international greed and warfare, so it too must be judged as part of human rebellion against God’s good intentions. The themes of distorted procreation and dominion are expressed in Holofernes’s plan to control and ravish Judith; because she resists his domination, “in the Christian tradition she represents various virtues, such as chastity in opposition to lust,” Hornik writes.

### *Departing Hymn*

“Pilgrims on this Earthly Journey” is on p. 67 of *Women in the Bible*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.